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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to investigate, describe, and compare the intonation patterns of Black English and Standard English speaking children in a reading (formal) and free discourse (informal) situation. Black English was defined as the linguistic code of the subjects sampled from the inner city black poverty area schools, and Standard English as the linguistic code of the subjects sampled from the upper-middle class white area schools. Thirty male Black English speakers and thirty male Standard English speakers, all between 12 and 14 years old, were sampled from junior high schools in two distinct socioeconomic areas of Los Angeles. All interviews were conducted with pairs of informants. Among the main findings of the study were the following: (1) Black English intonation patterns were different from Standard English intonation patterns for all sentence types and situations, except the specific question informal situation. (2) Black English displayed more level or rising terminal intonation contours than Standard English. (3) Black English displayed more rising initial intonation contours than Standard English. (4) The Black English speaker apparently differentiated between reading and free discourse situations by changing intonation patterns, whereas the Standard English speaker did not. (5) Standard English speakers maintain a higher pitch level than Black English speakers. (PP)

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A COMPARISON OF THE INTONATION PATTERNS OF BLACK ENGLISH AND STANDARD ENGLISH

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by

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Sociolinguistic investigations of Black English have provided a descriptive data base consisting of segmental, syntactic and phonemic features. Additionally, several social variables have been isolated which define where and when Black English might be spoken and who might speak it. Foremost among such studies are the Labov,[1] et al., series in New York City and the Wolfram,[2] et al., series in Detroit.

In reviewing these studies, as well as others, it is interesting to note the intuitive acceptance of different Black English suprasegmental features. Labov has written that:

> . . . voice qualifiers and intonation patterns are just as characteristic of Black English as grammatical and lexical features.[3]

In support of this contention, Labov cites an example of a particular intonation pattern used by Black children when asked a question to which the answer is obvious.

Although many people have volunteered their intuitive feelings regarding intonation, only two have attempted to conduct systematic studies. In 1967, Bengt Loman[4] conducted a study in Washington, D.C. and in 1972, Elaine Tarone[5] completed a study in Seattle, Washington. The objective of the Loman study was a description of the intonation and stress patterns of Black English, whereas that of the Tarone study was a comparison of the intonation patterns of vernacular Black and White English. Although each study was distinctly different in the maintenance of the interview situation, Tarone being informal and Loman being formal, the findings as noted in Table 1 are very similar. In addition, Black English was characterized by a wider pitch range and a greater use of the falsetto register. These findings seem to

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Table 1

Comparison of Black and Standard English

Terminal Intonation Contours

Studies		Phrases		
		Declarative Sentence	General Question	Special Question
Black English	Loman	32	level	32 or 2
	Tarone	*	level	*
Standard English	Pike**	31	23 or 34	31

*The quality of the tapes prevented differentiation between 32 and 21 final contours.

Note: Pitch levels are coded for analysis. Level 1 is the lowest and level 4 the highest. A 32 indicates a drop from level 3 pitch to level 2 pitch.

**K.L. Pike, The Intonation of American English (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1946).

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indicate that intonation patterns are not subject to the same stylistic variation rule which segmentals follow.

Essentially this rule maintains that speakers will move towards Standard English norms as the speaking situation moves towards formality or away from informality. In the case of the Black English speaker the usage frequency of features specific to the dialect will diminish as the situation moves towards formality. Situation or context are typically interpreted in terms of the task required, reading being formal and free discourse or general discussion being informal.

The purpose of this study was to investigate, describe, and compare the intonation patterns of Black English and Standard English speaking children in a reading (formal) and free discourse (informal) situation.

For the purpose of this study Black English was defined as the linguistic code of the subjects sampled from the inner city Black poverty area schools. Standard English was defined as the linguistic code of the subjects sampled from the upper-middle class White area schools.

Subjects

Thirty male Black English speakers and thirty male Standard English speakers were sampled from junior high schools located in two distinct socioeconomic areas of Los Angeles. The subjects ages varied between twelve and fourteen years.

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Interview

The interview was divided into two sections. In the first section subjects read from a script. The script was a fabricated interview between Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain with a one-upmanship theme. In the second section the subjects engaged in free discourse about specific topics. The topics included word games, role playing and the Bill Russell - Wilt Chamberlain interview. Although an experienced interviewer was involved in each session, he served only as a director or assistant. The subjects participated in pairs and interviewed each other.

Equipment

An Ampex Model 600 single track 7 1/2 inch per second recorder with two Electro-Voice 664 directional microphones was used for all interview recordings.

Pitch Extraction

All digitizing and pitch analysis was accomplished at the Systems Development Corporation in Santa Monica, California. The output of this computer analysis was a Hz figure every ten milliseconds for each utterance.

Preliminary Intonation Analysis

Utterances were categorized according to (1) sentence type (declarative, specific question or general question), (2) dialect (Black or Standard English) and (3) situation (reading or free discourse).

A percentage reporting method was used to control for varying

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utterance length. Thirty raw Hz scores were extracted from each utterance. Pauses were excluded from the total length calculation. Raw scores were tabulated, according to numbers one through thirty, which reflected the percentages zero (start) and one hundred (finish). Correlation coefficients were calculated and mean utterances were constructed according to sentence type, dialect and situation.

Findings

(1) Black English intonation patterns are different from Standard English intonation patterns for all sentence types and situations, except the specific question informal situation.

(2) Black English displayed more level or rising terminal intonation contours than Standard English.

(3) Black English displayed more rising initial intonation contours than Standard English.

(4) Situation manipulation produced different intonation patterns for the Black English declarative sentence and general question mean utterance, but not for the specific question mean utterance.

(5) Situation manipulation produced different intonation patterns for the Standard English general question mean utterance, but not for the specific question or declarative sentence mean utterance.

(6) Standard English speakers maintained a higher pitch level than Black English speakers.

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Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that Black English intonation patterns are different from Standard English intonation patterns. Furthermore, the findings in regard to Black English terminal intonation contours, are compatible with the findings of the Loman and Tarone studies (Table 1).

The hypothetical research extension offered by this researcher, regarding the similarity of Black English intonation patterns in different situations modeled in previous studies, was not wholly supported. Situation manipulation produced different intonation patterns for the Black English general question and declarative sentence mean utterances but not for the specific question mean utterances. However, only the Standard English general question mean utterances displayed differences between situations. Implying that the Standard English speaker may use the same intonation patterns for reading and informal discourse situations, whereas the Black English speaker by changing intonation patterns differentiates between reading and free discourse situations. Intonation seems to be more "communicatively salient" in Black English than in Standard English.

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